

Unsolved

Was Ray a loner or part of plot?

Keep



Jim Bishop

By JOHN BARKHAM

THE DAYS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. By Jim Bishop. Putnam. 516 pp. \$8.95.

Was Martin Luther King killed by James Earl Ray acting as a loner or as the triggerman in a conspiracy? Because Ray pleaded guilty in open court and was sentenced to 99 years imprisonment in what amounted to a minitrial, the question was not and may never be answered.

It is thus to investigative reporters that we must look for answers, if any.

This book by Jim Bishop is the first of two major inquiries into this vexing case. (The other, by Gerold Frank, is due early next year). Bishop is a highly competent reporter who interviewed many of the principals and studied all the published material in the affair. His narrative is structured in the same dramatic fashion he used for his popular books on the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy.

The vital difference in the King case is that, while we know who did the shooting, we do not know for sure why it was done or just how many persons were involved. Bishop, for all his diligent research, apparently doesn't know either.

The book opens with the shooting of King by Ray, then flashes back at length into the lives of both men up to the moment of their tragic rendezvous at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Oddly enough, Bishop virtually ignores the subsequent trial, presumably because so little surfaced there. Thus the gnawing question remains: did Ray act alone or was he part of a plot?

Bishop admits that after intensive research

he found nothing to substantiate Ray's story of meeting a mysterious "Raoul" in Canada. For his own part Bishop assumes that Ray had a "financial backer" and that the man who "financed the assassination, working alone or representing a group," gave Ray his orders. In another passage Bishop elaborates somewhat on this enigmatic statement:

"Someone gave James Earl Ray \$2,000 and a New Orleans phone number. He was told to call that number from time to time for orders. Whatever the orders were, Ray understood the nature of the assignment, because his Birmingham boss told Ray he would get an additional \$12,000 in cash and a visa to a foreign country, including an escape route through Canada."

Who were these shadowy "backers" and "bosses?" If Bishop knows their identities, he prefers not to reveal them here. If he assumes, as he apparently does, that Ray was paid and promised about \$20,000 for the murder of Martin Luther King, it is a large assumption to say the least. Unless and until Ray is able to get his trial re-opened and chooses to speak, we shall have to rely on evidence not assumptions.

Bishop devotes the bulk of his book to King's career and in particular to his achievement as a civil rights leader. This is written with obvious admiration for a charismatic leader

who, as none before him, was able to articulate the hopes and plaints of black people.

Bishop also records King's regret that the Negro middleclass — those who had "made it" — never gave his movement the support he expected of them. In the only conversation I ever had with King he made precisely the same point, though without any bitterness.

When he felt that black militants were eroding his passive resistance movement with slogans of "Burn, baby, burn!" he retorted with "Build, baby, build" — and wasn't he right?

If it was the intention of James Earl Ray that April day in 1968 to confuse and fragment the black people's movement, he succeeded. If he acted as the instrument of others in so doing, that still remains to be proved.

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